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AN INCIDENT AT ONE JUNIOR COLLEGE AND THE ENSUING CONTROVERSY OVER WHETHER OR NOT STUDENTS SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO WEAR HATS IN CAMPUS BUILDINGS IS USED AS AN EXAMPLE OF A MORE SERIOUS ISSUE CONCERNING THE JUNIOR COLLEGE'S RELATION TO THE COMMUNITY IT SERVES. THE ISSUES DISCUSSED CONCERN THE DEGREE TO WHICH A COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAN BE RESPONSIVE TO COMMUNITY NEEDS AND STILL BOTH MAINTAIN EDUCATIONAL SELF-RESPECT AND PROVIDE AN ATMOSPHERE OF INTELLECTUAL FERMENT. THE POSITION OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AND THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE WHICH LEADS NATURALLY TO INTELLECTUAL FERMENT ARE DISCUSSED. THE NEED FOR TECHNICAL, REMEDIAL, AND NON-TRANSFER ENGLISH COURSES CONCERNED WITH IDEAS ARE EMPHASIZED. (BN)

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Hats Off -- or On -- to the Junior College

Elizabeth McPherson

What I want to talk about is the philosophy of the junior college. But before everybody heads as rapidly as possible for the nearest open door -- the door of the dining room, not the college -- I'd better say quickly that I want totalk about more than the familiar phrases on page three of everybody's college catalog and repeated like a litany at every September orientation meeting. You know how they go: equal educational opportunity for every high school graduate; a chance to realize his fullest potential; a college responsive to the needs of the community.

Most of us sympathize with this philosophy, I'm sure. We want to offer equal educational opportunity to every high school graduate, if we can just find out how to do it. We'd like to give everybody over eighteen who can spare the time and the tuition and scare up the shoes to come to school in an honest chance to realize his fullest potential. Some of us may be uneasy about the discrepancy between the promise and the performance, between the philosophical come-on and the drop-out rate, but we're still willing to try.

"Responsive to the needs of the community" sounds all right, too, when you don't examine it too closely. If what the community needs is a wide array of courses, we can produce, and we do. We've got the first two years of transfer work; we've got a myriad of job-training programs, dental technology and data processing, practical nursing and TV repair, commercial cookery and cosmetology; we've got all kinds of repair courses, not just radios and carburetors, but reading and writing and math; we've got a night school program that offers most of what's given in the daytime and a lot else besides: how to fill out your income tax, how to decorate a cake,

how to pass the citizenship exam, how to cover an old davenport, how to get along with your wife. And there's nothing wrong with that. Unless a junior college offers a broad program, it may turn out to be no more than a cut-rate version of the first half of the state college.

For some of these courses, we have advisory committees from business and labor to help in the planning. I've no doubt that dentists can tell us what a dental technologist should know, and the mechanics' union knows more than I do about repairing a diesel truck. But I get a little edgy when I read, as I did the other day, that "community advisory committees have what might be considered indirect control over the institution." How responsive do we need to get? How responsive can we afford to get, and keep any educational self-respect? It's very easy for "responsive to the needs of a community" to become "pandering to the prejudices of the community." Do junior colleges, because they are junior, have to be meek supporters of the status quo? Do community colleges, because they are community, have to mirror and reinforce the weaknesses of that community? Can we get the emphasis off the junior and onto the college, and make the school a genuine center of intellectual ferment? This is the real philosophical question junior colleges face: do we serve the community better by doing what it tells us or by being, at least some of the time, a thorn in its side?

The question, like the door, is still open. Most of us have been so busy just being, scrambling into buildings, setting up the desks, full of wonder that junior colleges are suddenly an educational force to be reckoned with, that the decision hasn't been made. When the decision is made, it will be the junior college faculty that does the deciding. The catalog will keep right on saying the same old things, whether the faculty plumps for caution or for courage.

Let me tell you what happened last fall at a fairly large, fairly new, urban college I know about. This was a silly little matter, terribly unimportant, maybe, but it got to be known as the great hat controversy. At the first faculty meeting of the year, the administrator in charge opened by saying that he needed help on a little problem: some of the male students, he'd heard, were wearing their hats in the building, and one of the board members was a little upset about it. The administrator was sure, he said, that if every faculty member would just go up to every hatted student he saw and say quietly, "Haven't you forgotten something?" the student would say, "Thank you very much" and snatch off his headgear. The announcement didn't take very long; the administrator went rapidly on to other elements of the philosophy of that particular college.

But when the meeting adjourned there was a small flurry of indignation. Perhaps you know, but I didn't when I first heard the story, that there was more involved than a possibly out-of-date middle-class custom. There was a racial issue, too; it was only the Negro students for whom the hats, very narrow-brimmed and often very expensive, were a badge and a symbol. Somebody got up a petition that said colleges have no concern with hats, and got a few signatures. Somebody took the issue to the faculty association. In the association meeting there was an hour of bitter discussion. One side maintained that telling a student to take off his hat was not an infringement of individual liberty; instead, they said, the college owed him an obligation to teach him some manners. Another group thought we shouldn't even discuss it; the administration, they said, was hired to make the rules and teachers were hired to obey them. The teachers who started the fuss, of course, maintained that they'd been hired to do more than tend to their classes. High schools, they said, might send kids home to get their hair cut, but a college could be legitimately concerned only with what went on inside a student's head, not outside it.

Finally they voted on a very mild resolution: teachers who thought hats mattered could tell a student why, but no faculty member should be required to ask for hats off. The resolution carried by one vote. It was shipped along to the administrator, but somewhere in the long, long channel it got lost, and the ruling was never rescinded. An over-zealous campus cop, trying to enforce what he thought was a rule, very nearly started a fight. And although no teacher admits to saying "Haven't you forgotten something," hats come off when a teacher gets near. Some instructors are embarrassed by it. There's a big sign now, in the student lounge, that says "Take Your Hat Off." Apparently a student committee put it up. They learned pretty quickly what the junior college thinks is important.

There's no doubt, of course, that hats on or hats off is a pretty trivial matter -- on the surface. But it seems to me a symbol and a symptom of something that isn't trivial. In the featured article of the last NFA bulletin, Dr. Joseph Cosand said that one sign of better teaching will be the inclusion of "values...by which to live in our increasingly complex society." I'm not sure what he meant, but I don't think it was hats. I hope he meant we should be teaching students to examine their values, not to accept them blindly; to challenge the values we offer and make us question our own. Ten years ago Paul Jacobs said, "College can contribute to the growth of student values only when it penetrates the core of his life and confronts him with fresh and often disturbing implications which are different from those he and his society have taken for granted." To put it another way, a college behaves like a college only when it can get its students to stop saying, "Yes, sir," and start saying, "Why? How come? Who says so?"

It isn't easy to convince students that conformity is not the highest aim of man, especially when there's a grade at stake. Finding a rule and following it is a good deal simpler than thinking, and a good deal safer than sticking your neck out. Asking why leads to trouble, and communities don't like trouble, and administrators don't like trouble. Administrators especially don't like unhappy communities. It's a good thing -- maybe -- for an administrator to be able to show how well behaved his school is -- no sit-ins, no demonstrations, no riots. On the other hand, maybe he shouldn't boast about it. If nobody's protesting anything -- if the school newspaper never publishes a story somebody wants to censor, if the bulletin board never carries a poster somebody wants to tear down, education may not be happening. There's very little protest in a cemetery.

I think it would be a fair question at this point to ask what this has to do with English. Even if we agree that a junior college, like a university, ought to aim for intellectual turmoil instead of intellectual torpor, why bother English teachers about it? There are at least two reasons.

First, if there's going to be any subversion around, the English Department is likely to be mixed up in it, and I think that's to our credit. We grow more beards, we wear more way-out buttons than most other departments. If anybody's getting investigated for backing unpopular speakers, or complained about for corrupting his students with dangerous books, the chances of it being an English teacher are about three to one. This admirable tendency may be due to the nature of English teachers; it is, more likely, due to the nature of English.

The nature of English, and especially the nature of English courses, is the second reason. What we sometimes think of as a flaw -- that our subject matter is so broad and fuzzily defined that even fifty conferences devoted to finding out just what it is have resulted in little agreement --

is clearly a virtue here. If we want to use an English class to stick pins in the status quo, nobody can be really sure we're off subject.

The nature of English leads naturally to intellectual ferment. It's true that there is a lot of disagreement about the methods of teaching English, but I think there's very little real disagreement about what we're trying to teach. Everybody agrees that we're working with two general things, language and literature, and both of these things are basic to the question of values.

We can't talk about thinking without talking about language, because language is the only thing we have to think with. If Whorf is right, and many people think he is, the language we are born to shapes our thinking because it shapes our view of reality. Just knowing that, and there's no reason the knowledge shouldn't be shared with our students, can overturn some certainties. Once we know that naming something, and then saying something about it, is a habit we got because we speak an Indo-European language, rather than an inevitable way of regarding the world, ordained by God from the beginning, we've taken one small step toward conceding that ours is not the only way to view reality. Once we know that we are imprisoned by our language because we cannot think outside it, we have begun to question our values at a very fundamental level indeed.

Many of our students, however, are imprisoned by language in another way, too. Their status is determined by the language they speak; we are all language snobs. The use of certain kinds of dialects prevents people from holding certain kinds of jobs. More important than that, however, the way we speak conditions our view of ourselves. The long popularity of "My Fair Lady" has made it pretty general knowledge that it isn't the clothes that make the lady, it's the accent. Nevertheless, unless we're prepared to spend

as much concentrated attention on each student as Henry Higgins spent on Eliza, maybe we should leave dialects alone. When we recognize that the dialect we speak has some social and economic advantages, but no real superiority, and when we share this knowledge with students, we're examining values. This is another place where understanding can liberate; critism and condescension cannot.

The other half of our subject matter, the teaching of literature, needs no defense as part of a value system. We've been justifying it for years as a humane study, and there's no question that it is, especially if we teach it humanely. Whether the emphasis is on style and structure, on beauty through order and form, or whether the emphasis is on history and experience, on literature as an expression of man's joys and terrors, his aspirations and his frustrations, makes very little difference. Literature can't be taught without teaching values, because values are built in. The trick, of course, is to get the student to question these values, too. Just because Shakespeare said it, does that make it so? Just because Steinbeck wrote it, does that make it good? And just because it means something to us, with our greater sophistication, does that make it relevant to the student?

Approached with honesty, both language and literature can generate considerable intellecutal excitement. They can be subversive, in the best sense of the word, and it's our job to make them so. It's our job to make them intellectually exciting, not just for the good students, but for every English student in every course at every level. In fact, it's the non-transfer English, the technical courses, the remedial courses, that I want to make a special pitch for. It's here, I think, that we must make English a real market place of ideas, not a shabby secondhand store where only the very poor come to buy their wornout furniture.

Technical English, or English intended for technical students, offers a special temptation to emphasize utility instead of ideas. The community, as represented by those advisory committees, very often demands "practical English," without any frills. By practical English they presumably mean letter-writing, report writing, filling in the forms. But what is more practical than the flexible ability to manage more than one kind of writing? What is less frilly than clear thinking? The student who can write a straightforward and coherent paper on his reactions to a picnic or a poem can write a straightforward and coherent report. When he needs to write a report on the job, he'll have to use a special form anyway; provided we've also taught him to read and follow directions, he'll be all right. If the job he's been trained for is obsolete by the time he's thirty -- and at the rate technology is accelerating, a great deal of technical training will be -- the kind of reports we've been laboring over may be obsolete too. Unless we've taught him to work with ideas, to discover what he thinks by writing it down, we've cheated him. Dick Worthen's paper -- I think all of you have it -- makes a special point of saying that we must train not just for a narrow and immediate v<u>O</u>cation, but for a probable and extended v<u>A</u>cation -- for the leisure time that everybody is going to have more and more of, except English teachers. I think I'd go further and say that the more we train him v<u>A</u>cationally instead of v<u>O</u>cationally, the more emphasis we put on creativity, flexibility, spontaneity, the greater his chance of avoiding the unwanted perpetual leisure of unemployment. We need to train him, not just to work, but to live, and in the long run that may be the better job training.

Injecting some life and some skepticism into that whole complex of courses called remedial, however, seems to me even more urgent and more important. "Remedial" is not a very good term. I don't like it much, but I can't think of any current euphemism I like much better. By remedial,

as I'm using it now, I mean all the English courses taken by all the students who are culturally deprived or educationally deprived or whatever we're supposed to call it this year. These are the students who have been sorted out as not worthy of regular English, on some basis or other, a low percentile on some machine-graded achievement test, a bad high school record, a thirty-minute theme the English Department finds illiterate. They've been identified, more or less accurately, as people who can't spell very well, can't write very well, probably can't read very well either. And so with great forbearance on their part, often with great arrogance on ours, we set out to remedy whatever it is they can't do.

The assumption on which most remedial courses rest is that first the students must be brought up to some kind of literacy level, and <u>then</u> they can be introduced to ideas, question assumptions and argue premises. <u>Then</u>, but not till then, they can really "go to college." I'm suggesting that we have it backwards: first we should let them "go to college" -- they've not been there before or anywhere near it. With the examination of ideas and values the literacy will come, if it's going to, if the student decides he needs it.

By saying we should first let him "go to college" I don't mean we should plunge every student straight into a regular English class. I know the argument against segregating students according to achieverent: no matter what we call the sub-level course, the student who registers for it knows it's bonehead and it makes him feel inferior. That registration-week sense of inferiority, however, is nothing to the semester-long inferiority he will feel in a class where he's over his head. In regular classes such students are doomed to failure for two reasons: they can't compete with their more fluent, better trained classmates, and we must fail them on mechanics if we

want four year schools to keep on accepting our transfer credits. The argument is not that poorly prepared students be thrown into classes where they cannot win, but that the classes they are in pay the same kind of respect to ideas, generate the same kind of excitement, as the rest of our classes do. The remedial class is where English teachers need most to examine their own assumptions, to deal realistically with their own prejudices. If we really believe that having something to say is more important than spelling, that content outweighs punctuation, that people are more important than pedantry, the remedial class is our best chance to turn honest again.

I would give you specific examples of what I mean, but unfortunately remedial approaches that are intellectually stimulating are very rare indeed. That they are scarce, however, doesn't mean that we can't create them or that we can't find them. We've got to find them. For one reason, what we're doing now doesn't work, most of the time, with most students. For another reason, more important, if we're really committed to the notion of intellectual excitement, instead of intellectual stagnation, we have to aim for it everywhere, from the humblest section to the highest. In fact, we have to work harder in the humbler sections where the kids have never had the nerve to ask why, have never supposed they knew enough to take issue with a teacher. An honors class will spark anyway; a remedial group has to be sparked.

I've probably overstated the case when I say there are no remedial courses that are intellectually exciting. A few experimental ideas have been tried in a few isolated schools, and some of them are working. Some of the ideas turned up in grade school experiments can be adapted to adults. There have been very few attempts to translate new knowledge about language and language learning into a practical course. But some suggestions have

been made, some directions indicated. And for purposes of experimentation, perhaps the wilder the idea is, the more it is worth trying. If we're going to produce something, we have to take a chance.

Paul Goodman, for instance, in the January 4 issue of the New York Review of Books, makes some provocative remarks about reading. He says the normal middle-class child, who is constantly exposed to a written culture, would learn to read by the time he was nine just as spontaneously as he learned to talk by the time he was three. Even if he never goes to school, the child will pick up the writing code, unless, Goodman says, "he is systematically interrupted and discouraged, for instance, by trying to teach him." Maybe there's a suggestion here. If our efforts at forced teaching haven't already damaged our non-reading students beyond repair, can we adapt this idea? Can we immerse students in a written culture to the point that they must read and therefore they learn on their own? Being eighteen instead of eight might require some special help, but it might not, too. Could we try a six-hour lab, with a vow of total silence, and nothing but written material around? It's a wild idea, but we should be trying wild ideas.

What can we do about writing? There's always the chance, of course, that when real reading skill comes, writing skill will come with it. We know this is true with better students. Those who read really well, with understanding and appreciation, all write acceptably. There are no perceptive writers who aren't perceptive readers, too.

Meantime, however, while we're waiting for reading to be perfected, we might take a look at the Kohl system. In his booklet, "Teaching the Unteachable," Herbert Kohl outlines the success he had with underprivileged

New York school children. He gave them first a sense of worth, a real belief that somebody really wanted to read what they had to say. He did not sneer at their illiteracies, either overtly or covertly; he didn't mark them -- he didn't see them. When a modification of this system has been tried at junior colleges, the students write first for fluency. The idea is to break down the inhibitions and sense of inferiority that has been carefully built up for at least twelve years. No red or green or blue marks are made on their papers; no attempt is made to "correct" anything they write. Somebody cares enough to read, that's all. If students can learn to express themselves by this system, there's at least a chance -- not a big one, but a chance -- that when they have produced a paper that's worth conventional spelling, a piece of writing they care about punctuating, the spelling and the punctuation will come. If it doesn't, there's not much lost. Vapid, meaningless ideas are not worth punctuating, and the ability to spell, without the ability to write, is no more useful than a crossword puzzle, and a lot less fun.

And how do we teach usage? My own idea would be that we don't. Like writing, some of it will come with reading. But if it doesn't, and if the student himself thinks a dialect shift is important, then we need some new approaches here too. The question of usage, I think, is very much like the question of hats. Which is the more important status symbol for the student: leaving his hat on and keeping his own identity? Taking it off and learning to be an imitation WASP? This is a decision only the student can make.

It is true that for some kinds of jobs and some kinds of success the student <u>will</u> have to make a language change. We might as well be honest and admit it. Ralph Bunche wouldn't be where he is if, instead of adopting the speech of the educated, he had kept the dialect of the Harlem Negro. If

we have students who are determined to make it, in this sense, let's tell them frankly what they have to do and why they need to do it. Then let's take some hints from what most of our foreign language departments already know -- learning to speak a second language takes concentrated imitation and practice, it takes listening to actual educated speech and copying the sound and the cadence and the idiom. It's done in a language laboratory with tapes and machines, not by memorizing rules and analyzing grammar systems. Knowing that a pronoun must agree with its antecedent never helped anybody change his dialect, although it has undoubtedly made many thousands of people very, very nervous, and a few dozens very, very smug.

If changing his dialect is not the student's own idea, however, we have no right to insist on it simply because we prefer the sound of our own. If we are a college, and not just defenders of the status quo, we've more important business than worrying about dialect changes. Another school article, in the New York Review for February 1, begins with this paragraph:

> A white school administrator in the District of Columbia unwittingly provided a clue to the pathology of urban education. She was talking frankly about the "two language" problem of a school population that is 91 percent Negro. Yes, she agreed, Negro children speak a dialect whose consistency we ought, in some measure, to respect. "But then," she said, ... "there is the problem of getting jobs. For example, take the young man who goes to the store for a job. A lady comes out of the store with a package, and he offers, in his dialect, to carry it for her. She isn't quite sure what he has said, and his tone has put her off as well, and so she says, 'No, thank you.' And the boy doesn't get the job."

And then the paragraph goes on to say:

> The sight of black children educated to haul packages for ladies is a common and haunting one; you see them at Washington's supermarkets any day in the week. Nothing so shapes the education these children are given as the ideas people hold about the purposes of that education.

Paul Lauter and Florence Howe, of course, are talking about the hopeless condition of the public schools in the nation's capitol; they aren't

thinking about junior colleges. But with some apology, I'd like to apply it anyway. It seems to me true that nothing so shapes the education we give our own students as the ideas we hold about the purposes of that education. If all we're doing for our non-transfer students is train them for the adult equivalent of carrying packages, then we'd better change our name -- keep the community and drop the college. If we do decide we're going to be colleges -- I think I'm back where I began -- it may well be because the English department breaks new ground and goes in, not for the idiocy of drill, but for the excitement of ideas. We may not create the kind of intellectual ferment that will shake the world, or even the city, but it's a sight better than teaching them to take their hats off.

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